THE REDEEMER FIGURE IN THE PARAPHRASE OF SHEM

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The Paraphrase of Shem is the first of the five tractates contained in Codex VII, which is the best preserved of all the codices of the Nag Hammadi Library. It is made up of almost 50 pages of Coptic text (1, 1-49, 9) which, except for a few pages where the bottom line is partly missing, is in an excellent state of preservation.

The meaning of the title is not immediately apparent. The reason is that the actual "paraphrase" does not begin until page 32, 26, and concludes already at 34, 16. For after a formal ending of the main section of the tractate, the phrase "this is the paraphrase" occurs (32, 36), followed by a commentary, which defines in terms of the preceding myth the roles of the some 20 or more personages just listed in a "memorial" or "testimony" revealed by Derdekeas to Shem [1]) (31, 4-32, 5), and recited later (46, 4-47, 7) [2]) by Shem on leaving the body when his "time was completed." The paraphrase thus serves the function, stated rather explicitly at its conclusion (34, 16-32), of permitting the Shemites to understand the mythological implications of memorized lists of names to be recited at one's final ascent.

The tractate has two speakers, the recipient of revelation, Shem, and the revealer-redeemer, Derdekeas. After the title and sub-title ("The Paraphrase which took place about the unbegotten Spirit"), Shem tells about an ecstatic experience during which his mind was separated from his body as if in sleep, when he was caught up to the top of creation close to the supreme being, the Light. This ecstatic scene conforms closely to the general framework of apocalyptic literature, particularly apocalypses which describe a rapture into heaven such as Slavonic Enoch [3]) and the Apocalypse

[1]) The actual spelling is consistently Sēem.

[2]) There is a major dittography in this section: 46, 10-20 and 46, 20-29.

[3]) R. H. CHARLES, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* II (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1913), p. 431.

of Paul [1]). The first treatise of the Corpus Hermeticum, the *Poimandres* [2]), is a parallel of particular significance for the understanding of both the framework and the tractate as a whole.

Shem, although frequently directly addressed by Derdekeas, does not recur as the speaker until near the end of the revelation, when he "awakens" from his rapture (41, 21-30). However, this closing scene of the rapture is followed by more revelation, which can only have been spoken by Derdekeas, although there is no noticeable transition of speakers. A few pages later Shem is speaking again, telling us about the ecstatic experience when his "time was completed." This is followed by a vision of the spheres, which the tractate calls clouds, through which Shem will ascend after having come forth from the body. Finally, without an identifiable transition, the speaker changes again to Derdekeas, who brings the tractate to a close.

This confusing ending suggests that the apocalyptic framework of ecstatic ascent and return, at the beginning and end, may be secondary. The same is true for the many uses of the name Shem in the vocative case throughout the long revelation by Derdekeas. How clumsily the name Shem is added is visible in 4, 12, where it stands in apposition to the first person singular, although the context leaves no doubt that Derdekeas is speaking. Actually even the title of the work is incorrect. The paraphrasing is not done by Shem but by Derdekeas himself (cf. 33, 18 ff. and 34, 16 f.). We must return to the implications of the secondary nature of the framework at a later point.

In order to present a background for the redeemer figure, and to bring out the non-Christian nature of the tractate, a brief summary of the content is called for. It should be kept in mind that this summary does not follow the flow of the tractate, since the revelation does not follow a chronological pattern, but rather frequently back-tracks, repeats [3]), expands, changes terminology and generally tends to confuse and obscure.

As often in gnostic literature, the revelation is not presented as new material, but as knowledge that Shem's root once possessed

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[1]) HENNECKE-SCHNEEMELCHER, *New Testament Apocrypha* II (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), p. 759.

[2]) NOCK-FESTUGIÈRE, *Corpus Hermeticum* I, 1 (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belle Lettres", 1945), p. 7.

[3]) For a clear case of a doublet cf. 12, 16-28 and 16, 36-17, 10.

but lost because of forgetfulness (1, 28-31). The revelation tells of the three primeval powers, Light, Darkness, and Spirit between them. As in early Persian and Manichaean mythology, the original balance between the powers is disturbed by the principle of evil, Darkness, who realizes his inferiority and yearns for equality. The attack of Darkness is not directed at the Light, since he is ignorant of it (2, 27 f.), but at the Spirit.

The position of the unbegotten Spirit between Light and Darkness is not merely spatial. It has ontological significance. On the one hand the Spirit belongs on the side of the Light over against Darkness; but it does not share the Light's incorruptibility and transcendence, for it can fall. It is significant that while the redeemer, Derdekeas, is associated with the perfect Light, Shem and his race have their root in the Spirit (1, 28 ff.; 29, 25 f.; 37, 16 ff.). They are made up of a part of the winds and demons, but with a mind from the Spirit (24, 6-9). Thus the unbegotten Spirit functions as archetypal man, or rather as the archetype of the Shemite race, and the drama of fall and salvation, although cosmic and prior to creation, is decisive for mankind.

The fall of the power or light of the Spirit is only hinted at in the the document. It may have been the moment that the Spirit looked down at the dark water [1]) (2, 23 ff.), or when the Nous of Darkness, which had been lifted up by Darkness in order to be like the Spirit (3, 11 ff.), collided with the unbegotten Spirit (5, 16 ff.).

This Nous of Darkness plays an ambiguous role in the revelation. On the one hand it is the prime tool of Darkness to accomplish his evil schemes, while on the other hand it is, together with the light of the Spirit, the object of the salvation efforts of Derdekeas (11, 8 ff.). This dual aspect must be seen in the light of the fact that the perfect Light or Majesty is at all times in control, and permits Darkness' evil schemes only because they will, paradoxically, lead to the separation of the Nous from Darkness and thus to the eventual downfall of Darkness himself (2, 29-35; 4, 13-21; 6, 2 ff.; 21, 21 f. etc.). Thus the Paraphrase of Shem presents us with a tempered dualism such as might have developed under the influence of Judaism. One could see it as a transitional form between

[1]) Cf. Gen. i 2. A fuller form of this aspect of the myth is found in the *Pistis Sophia* p. 45 f. (manuscript page reference) and *Poimandres* 14, NOCK-FESTUGIÈRE, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

the dualistic Iranian type of Gnosticism and the monistic Syrian-Egyptian branch, such as Valentinianism.

It falls outside the purpose of this paper to seek to explain the complex descriptions of Darkness with its Physis and womb and clouds [1]), its putrid waters and winds and demons. The vivid sexual symbolism used was apparently meant to call up a feeling of horror in the reader rather than intellectual understanding. If this was the intent, then the repeating and overlapping scenes with their ever-fluid terminology add an appropriate sense of chaos [2]).

The name of the redeemer-revealer in the tractate is Derdekeas [3]), the son of the incorruptible and infinite Light (4, 2 f.). He is described variously as the image or likeness of the exalted Light (3, 34f.), the ray of the universal Light (4, 5 f.), and even as a light wave and a whirlwind (7, 2 f.). Thus Derdekeas is the manifestation of the perfect and transcendent being.

The appearance or descent of Derdekeas has a two-fold purpose. First of all, he comes to rescue the light of the Spirit and the Nous of Darkness from Hades (11, 27-31). Secondly, he intends to bring Darkness and his evil products and manifestations to naught. The descent is, of course, not to the earth, for it has not yet been created, but to the realm of Darkness, called Chaos (18, 12 f.), Tartaros (15, 30 f.) or "this lowliest place" (14, 5 f.).

The "descensus ad inferos" of the redeemer brings upon him the wrath of the world (36, 13 f.). He tells Shem, "There was not one of them who knew me. The gates of fire and endless smoke opened against me. All the winds rose up against me. The thunderings and the lightning flashes, for a time, will rise up against me. And they will bring their wrath against me" (36, 14-22; cf. 39, 28-30). Yet, in spite of this opposition, Derdekeas is victorious (36, 14).

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[1]) The female reproductive organs have been given cosmic dimensions. The outer (?) sphere of the realm of Darkness is the cloud of the Hymen, and next to it is the cloud of the Chorion, the membrane around the fetus. The womb is the depth of Darkness, also called Hades and Tartaros.

[2]) This does not preclude the view that we may be dealing with a patchwork of redaction and sources.

[3]) The name Derdekeas may have been derived from the Aramaic word דרדקא which refers to a small child or beginning student. The son of the king in the "Hymn of the Pearl" was a little child when he was sent into the world. A. F. J. KLIJN, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), p. 120. J. DORESSE suggest a connection between Derdekeas and the Aramaic root דרדד, to fall in droplets. *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1960), p. 147.

The means of salvation are of particular interest. Derdekeas uses various garments [1]). These garments not only protect Derdekeas as he travels through the clouds (18, 9-16), they also throw the evil powers into confusion so that they have to shed the powers of the Spirit (12, 23-35 and 18, 27-19, 9). They also will help the race of Shem to ascend through the hostile spheres (43, 9 f.). One is reminded here of the use of garments in the Hymn of the Pearl [2]). However, in the Hymn the garments have no saving function [3]).

Part of the redeemer's function involves the creation of heaven and earth. When Derdekeas, the son of the Majesty, is down in Hades, he finds himself in front of the womb. Since he is discovered by the animal offspring of the womb, he puts on the beast as a disguise. Physis thinks that he is one of her offspring. Making use of her misplaced goodwill, he "puts before her a request that heaven and earth may come into being, in order that the whole light may rise up". The creation, although an evil act of the forces of Darkness, is a necessary step in the process of salvation. Through it the power of the Spirit can be freed from its bonds (19, 25-20, 9). It is known from other gnostic sources that creation leads to the concentration of the fallen light particles into human beings who then, through Gnosis, can be rescued from the evil powers of the cosmos. [4])

Derdekeas does not perform his saving work as a mere agent of the perfect Light. It is not mentioned that he was sent by anyone. Rather he speaks of his pity for the light of the Spirit which the Nous of Darkness had taken (7, 31-33). He intercedes for the Spirit before the infinite exalted Light (7, 35). He calls himself "a helper of everyone who has been given a name" (14, 6 f.).

Derdekeas' ascent is not elaborated on. We read near the end of the main section (32, 9-12): "Then I shall come out of the water after I have put on the light of Faith and the unquenchable fire." He also mentions that after his stay on earth his unequalled garment will shine upon him together with all his other garments. These essential instruments of salvation will shine and rest in their

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[1]) Derdekeas has an appropriate garment for each of the clouds. In Hades he used a garment of fire. The names of the garments are Chelkeach, Chelkea, and the Righteous one or Spark (p. 33) respectively.

[2]) KLIJN, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-125.

[3]) Like the son of the king, Derdekeas sheds his universal or holy garment before he enters the first cloud (12, 18 and 17, 1).

[4]) For example, in Valentinianism. Cf. H. JONAS, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 195.

root (38, 29-29, 23). The resultant picture is that of eternal reward and heavenly bliss.

A summary of the redeemer figure in the Paraphrase of Shem will bring into focus its relevance to the N.T. The redeemer is the son and likeness of the perfect Light, in substance equivalent to the Christian concept of the pre-existent son of God. Moved by pity he descends to the realm of evil to save the fallen light of the Spirit, which is the root and origin of the race of Shem. During his stay in Hades he experiences the hostility of the powers of Darkness and goes unrecognized. He puts on "the beast," which seems to be the body, and in that disguise advances the work of salvation, which is a cosmic event. After his stay on earth he receives honor from his garments. Finally, he reveals his saving work as the life-giving Gnosis to his elect.

What becomes immediately apparent is that we have here in one form or other the features which have long been suspected by many New Testament scholars to be outside influences on New Testament Christology [1]). We are faced with a gnostic redeemer myth which overlaps the Christian redeemer only in those features which have a certain likelihood of being originally pre- or non-Christian. Most important, this gnostic redeemer myth is here found in what appears to be a non-Christian tractate.

The issue of the non-Christian nature of the tractate needs further examination. Granted that there is no obvious Christian material in the tractate, there could still be concepts and issues which could not be accounted for apart from Christian influence. After all, just as there are cases of Christianization among Nag-Hammadi tractates [2]), it is also conceivable that there was a process of de-Christianization going on in gnostic circles, particularly at a relatively late date when the gnostic sects were losing the battle against the orthodox Church and were moving away from Christianity. In that case, all obvious Christian references would have been removed, leaving us only with hints and traces.

There are, of course, several distant parallels with the New

[1]) A summary of such features can be found in R. BULTMANN, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), pp. 175-208.

[2]) Cf. MARTIN KRAUSE, "Das literarische Verhältnis des Eugnostosbriefes zur Sophia Jesu Christi. Zur Auseinandersetzung der Gnosis mit dem Christentum," *Mullus: Festschrift Theodor Klauser* (*JAC*, Ergänzungsband I, 1964), pp. 215-23.

Testament. The garments which the savior puts on bring to mind the armor of God in Eph. vi 11-17. However, the symbolic use of raiment in hellenistic religious literature is too general to draw any conclusions about influence and literary dependence. [1]) So also the parallels between apocalyptic sections in the Paraphrase of Shem and the N.T. tell us nothing more than that both stand in the general tradition of Jewish apocalypticism. Apart from a few more unproductive formal parallels [2]), there are two issues around which the whole argument may turn. The one is the use of the word πίστις, the other the polemic against baptism.

Quite apart from its relationship to the N.T., the use and meaning of πίστις in the Paraphrase of Shem remain obscure. Its usage ranges from simple "trust" (48, 32) to a clear personification (30, 11). As personified, Pistis seems to be connected with the final judgment (37, 4), and with the Demon (30, 2). Pistis has a place (28, 30), a mind (30, 29), a mouth (31, 20), a light (32, 11) and a will (35, 11). She is also called the first and the last (31, 26; 33, 25; 46, 18 f. and 46, 28), as is Jesus in Rev. i 17 etc. Although none of the usages of Pistis proves independence from the N.T. usage of the term, still the distinctive usages of the term in the N.T. do not seem to be presupposed. A final conclusion awaits a full study of the role of faith in the Paraphrase of Shem and in Gnosticism.

We also must suspend final judgment on the background of the polemic against baptism in the Paraphrase of Shem. Controversial and complicated issues are at stake concerning John the Baptist, baptismal sects and gnostic views about baptism, which would carry us well beyond the scope of this paper. The tractate speaks of the Demon called Soldos (30, 32),[3]) who will appear upon the river, in order to baptize with an incomplete baptism, and to move the world with a chain of water (30, 22-27). The polemic centers on water, for this element belongs to the domain of darkness. Mankind is bound with water (36, 29 and 37, 17). Men who

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[1]) Cf. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI, 24.

[2]) In 34, 25 f. the sentence occurs, "No one who wears the body will be able to complete these things," which resembles I Cor. xv 50. The tractate contains a catalog of vices (37, 29-35) which is similar in form to those in the Pauline corpus.

[3]) The association of the Demon with the tower and the flood suggests that he is the God of the Jews. However, this leaves obscure his role as a baptist.

"wear the erring flesh" are led astray by thinking "that by the baptism of uncleanness with water which is dark, feeble, idle and destructive, (the demon) will take away sins" (37, 21-25). This curious polemic is much more easily explained as directed at a Jewish baptismal sect than at Christian baptism [1]).

Some may want to see the influence of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan near the end of the main section of the tractate. The passage reads (32, 5-17): "Then I shall come, through the demon, down to the water. And whirlpools of water and flames of fire will rise up against me. Then I shall come out of the water after I have put on the light of Faith and the unquenchable fire, in order that the Power of the Spirit, which will be sown in the creation by the winds and the demons and the stars, may cross over through the opportunity I provide." However the idea of a baptism of the Savior runs counter to the teaching of the tractate. The passage just quoted does not speak of baptism, but of Derdekeas' descent to and ascent from the realm of Darkness. Since Darkness is "winds in waters" (2, 1), the reference to water is quite natural here. There is no hint of the divine consecration of the Redeemer as in the canonical Gospels.

In contrast to such slim and controversial parallels with Christianity, the dependence of the Paraphrase of Shem on the O.T. is clear. Not only are Sodom and the Sodomites mentioned (29, 1.13.20.28), be it in a favorable sense, but also the flood (25, 12; 28, 5.14) and the tower (of Babel) (25, 17.25; 28, 9) play a role. The catalog of vices (37, 29-35) is close to the ten commandments, although not in the same order. Finally, the Genesis creation stories are a major source for the cosmogony and creation accounts of the tractate. For example, the third principle, the unbegotten Spirit, is derived from Gen. i 2, the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters. Thus, in spite of the fact that the Paraphrase of Shem repudiates the Jewish God and vindicates O.T. villains, its dependence upon the O.T. betrays itself at many places. If the tractate also presupposed Christianity, however polemically, we would have expected identifiable traces of Christian material comparable to those from the O.T.

Instead of evidence of de-Christianization, we do have good

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[1]) The rejection of baptism in an early Palestinian Gnostic sect, the Archontici, will be discussed below.

evidence of Christianization of the tractate elsewhere than in the Nag Hammadi copy. Hippolytus uses a form of the Paraphrase of Shem as his main source for the doctrine of the Sethians [1]). (The fact that he calls it the Paraphrase of Seth cannot detract from the striking agreements in content. The secondary nature of the framework of the tractate and of the name "Shem" suggests that the work was modified during its transmission.) In Hippolytus' version Christological interpretations have been added. The scene in the Paraphrase of Shem described above where the redeemer puts on the disguise of "the beast" in front of the womb, to call for the act of creation so as ultimately to rescue the Nous and the light of the Spirit, is in Hippolytus' version interpreted as the incarnation of Christ. According to his source, the beast, taken as a serpent, is the Word of God coming down to the womb of the virgin in the form of a servant [2]). Only extremely forced exegesis, such as was practiced by Christian-Gnostic sects, would have seen the Christian incarnation in this scene. And to turn the situation around, to seek to derive the "disguise scene" in the Paraphrase of Shem from the Christian incarnation, for example, from Phil. ii 6 f., is plainly untenable. Also other details found in the account of Hippolytus but not in the Paraphrase of Shem suggest that the heresiologist did not have our Paraphrase of Shem before him, but rather a Sethian interpretation of it [3]), in which a Christianizing ingredient must have been involved.

While the reference in the *Philosophumena* puts the *terminus ad quem* for the Paraphrase of Shem in the first part of the third century, other evidence suggests a considerably earlier date. In any case, this *terminus ad quem* is well before the time of the persecution of Christian heretics by the orthodox, in which context one might not readily place a conscious effort at de-Christianizing

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[1]) Hippolytus, *Elenchos* (Philosophumena) V 19-22. Hippolytus calls his source "The Paraphrase of Seth." That Shem was interchanged with Seth among some Sethians is attested by St. Augustine, who in his brief report on the Sethians in *De Haeresibus* chapter 19 [L. G. Müller ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1956), p. 72] discloses that "quidam eos dicunt Sem filium Noë Christum putare." Since Sethians identified Seth with Christ (e.g. in iii, 2), their identification of Shem with Christ indicates an identification of Shem with Seth.

[2]) *Ibid.*, V 19, 20.

[3]) The many details missing in Hippolytus' account and the lack of verbal agreement make it most unlikely that he made use of a copy of the Greek Vorlage of the Coptic Paraphrase of Shem.

Christian-gnostic material—if there ever was such a time. Actually, Hippolytus' use of the tractate limits its *terminus ad quem* to a time when Gnosticism still readily presented itself as the true interpretation of Christianity. The blending of Christian elements and interpretations with non-Christian material was still in full swing, as we see in Hippolytus' account of the doctrines of the Sethians. Finding a tractate without clear Christian traits from that period is more readily attributable to non-Christian origin than to intentional camouflage.

There are no references to the Paraphrase of Shem in Irenaeus or Epiphanius. However, their descriptions of early Gnostic sects have some striking resemblances to the Paraphrase of Shem. In the famous account of the Sethian doctrines in Irenaeus' *Contra Haereses* XXX, we have the same three primeval powers as in our tractate: first of all the incorruptible and infinite light and his son, below these the only Spirit who, in turn, is above the water, darkness, abyss and chaos [1]). Thus Irenaeus not only supports Hippolytus' description of the Sethians, he also dates a major aspect of the system contained in the Paraphrase of Shem back toward the middle of the second century.

Epiphanius knew of an early Gnostic sect, the Archontici, who considered water for baptism anathema, although, he reports, some of them had previously been baptized [2]). What makes this case even more interesting is that Archontici lived in Palestine and were closely related to the Sethians.

Anyone asking for proof of a pre-Christian date for the Paraphrase of Shem will not be satisfied. It is in the nature of the material that such proof can seldom be supplied. But such proof is only necessary for those who have surrendered to the "post hoc, ergo propter hoc" fallacy. The evidence we have pushes the main tenets of the Paraphrase of Shem back to at least the middle of the second century. If literature from that era does not bear unmistakable evidence of distinctively Christian influence, then it must be considered non-Christian [3]).

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[1]) Irenaeus, *Contra Haereses* XXX, 1.

[2]) Epiphanius, *Panarion* 40:2.6.

[3]) In Hegemonius' *Acta Archelai* LXVII. 5, 7-11, Basilides is reported to have commended a system of the Barbarians, i.e. the Persians, which is close to that of the Par. of Shem. It has only two primeval principles, Light and Darkness, but the state of balance between the two powers, and the attack of Darkness which follows, bears a close resemblance to our tractate.

To sum up, a preliminary study of the Paraphrase of Shem indicates that it is a non-Christian gnostic work which, like the Poimandres, made use of and radically transformed O.T. material. The tractate contains a redeemer figure whose features agree with those aspects of N.T. Christology which have a high probability of being pre-Christian in origin. As such, the Paraphrase of Shem deserves serious consideration in a discussion of Christian origins, and promises to be relevant to the understanding of the development of Christology in the New Testament.

Since Basilides is considered one of the predecessors of Mani, the Par. of Shem may help us to reconstruct the western-gnostic sources of Manichaeism.